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ABSTRACT

Socially rejected students are actively excluded for long periods of time by many of their peers at school and are often the recipients of verbal or physical abuse. Although most consideration of this problem has focused on rejected students, social rejections could be considered as a group phenomenon, determined by the structure of the social environment and the emotional and intellectual development of the rejectors. Rejected students, regardless of their specific characteristics, have one trait in common: they are different from their peers. Models used to explore the reasons that students reject deviants focus on: (1) imitation; (2) developmental factors; (3) the authoritarian personality; (4) group solidarity; and (5) intergroup conflict. Although different models may explain rejection in different schools, the rejection of peers appears to be an inherent part of social development and the structure of the school social environment. Teachers and school personnel may mitigate some of the physical and verbal abuse the rejected student faces by helping other students to realize that when they reject a peer, they are rejecting a person with feelings. Emphasis must shift from the rejected student to the process of rejection itself. (NRB)

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Social Rejection as a Developmental And Group Process: A New Perspective for Teachers, Administrators and Counselors

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

There's a boy in my class, and the girls hate him. The boys do too. He's too rough when he plays. Sometimes he breaks things. So they call him a retard, and nobody wants to be his partner on class trips. No one wants to play with him, either. I think if the class would be nicer to him, he would probably be the same to them.

-- Matthew, grade 3

(from Newsday, Summer 1978)

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Social Rejection as a Developmental And Group Process: A New Perspective for Teachers, Administrators and Counselors

Most teachers and counselors recognize the seriousness of the situation of the socially rejected student, which is defined as the student who is actively excluded for long periods of time, if not indefinitely, by many or most of his peers at school. Frequently this rejection is accompanied by verbal or physical abuse.

Social rejection has long term effects. Kuhlen and Callister (1952) found in their study that socially rejected ninth graders were more likely to become high school dropouts. Although this is the only longitudinal study which definitely examines the effects of rejection on the rejected student, a variety of studies have shown that older rejected or isolated students are generally more anxious and insecure than younger rejected or isolated students as measured by personality tests, (Bonney 1943; Gronlund and Anderson, 1957; Bonney and Powell, 1953; Belfield, 1963; McCandless, 1956; Bedoian, 1953; Bauer, 1971). As the majority of studies have shown that sociometric status, and a rejected status in particular, is relatively stable among students, that is, students who are rejected by their peers often remain that way, (Gronlund, 1955; Staker, 1948; Taylor, 1952; Werthiemer, 1957; Witryoland Thompson, 1953), it

is possible that the insecurity and anxiety that the older rejected student displays is a result of being rejected when he was younger.

Regardless of whether or not rejection affects personality, it is clear that the abuse and rejection experienced in childhood make a lasting impression. This researcher has found it difficult to interview adults who were abused by their peers at school as children or adolescents. They remember their experiences vividly but often refuse to discuss them in detail because they claim it is too upsetting.

In the past, the consideration of this problem has focused primarily on the rejected student. Most studies have considered the characteristics of the rejected student and what can be done to change the student so that he will become more acceptable to his peers.

Rejection, however, is a conscious activity. The rejected student is being acted upon, not doing the acting. To believe that the solution to the problem lies in trying to modify certain characteristics of the rejected student is in effect blaming the rejected student for the actions of others. Whether or not modifying the rejected student mitigates the abuse and rejection he faces, the reasons behind the group's rejection of him remains undetermined and the situation which caused his rejection remains unchanged. It is both feasible and desirable to consider social rejection as a group phenomenon, determined by the structure of the social environment and the emotional and intellectual development of those doing the rejecting.

Various studies have shown that the rejected student is frequently from a lower socio-economic family background than his peers (Coleman, 1961; Hollingshead, 1945; Eicher, 1975; Braun, 1954); a child new to the group (Ames, 1953; Frymier, 1957); poorer and/or less active athletically (McCraw and Tolbert, 1953; Jones, 1946); unattractive or different physically, (Eicher 1968, 1973 and 1975; Cannon, 1952; Lerner and Lerner, 1978); over age, (Wall, 1960; Morrison, 1956; Taylor, 1952); deviant in academic achievement or I.Q. (Bonney, 1943; Wall, 1960; Bloomer, 1969; Gallagher, 1959; Stevens, 1971; Muma, 1966, and Ryan and Davie, 1958; Eicher, 1966; Justman, 1953; Porterfield and Schlicting, 1961); conforms less in behavior (Bonney and Powell, 1953, 1954; Northway, 1944; Lorber, 1966; Laughlin, 1954; Gronlund, 1959; Peretti, 1975; Denham, 1977); and is generally more anxious and insecure than his better accepted peers (Belfield, 1963; McCandless, 1956; Bedoian, 1953; Bauer, 1971). Regardless of the specific characteristics that an individual rejected student has, however, all have one trait in common: they are different from others around them.

This answer is, however, circular. Obviously the rejected student must be thought to be different from the group to be a recognizable target. But what more can be said? Social rejection is a phenomenon that is common to hundreds of thousands of individual schools throughout the United States. Each individual school has its own customs, norms, and values. Although many of these may be held in common with other schools, the par-

ticular combination, emphasis and intensity of these norms, values and customs is unique to that school. Furthermore, they change over time with the forces exerted on the school from the overall society and with the emotional development of the group in the same grade as it passes through the grades together (Jones, 1976). The student who does not conform to important values or expectations held by the group is almost always rejected unless he is recognized by his peers as making a particularly important contribution to the group. (Cunningham, 1952; Frymier, 1957).

If then, the rejected student is usually a deviant, the question to be answered is why do students reject deviants? The following models may provide partially contrasting yet complementary perspectives on this phenomenon.

I. Imitation

If a student is asked why he harasses a reject student he will probably reply that everyone does it. Children frequently ostracize and abuse certain students because they see that that is what others are doing and they wish to imitate their peers. It appears, for example, that children in a group are more cruel to rejected students than individually (Hurlock, 1964).

Various theories state that imitation is an important contributing factor to prejudice. People follow their leaders in behavior. In times of social uncertainty, or anomie, prejudices increase, as in Nazi Germany, people are uncertain

as to their own beliefs and values and follow the pronouncements of a leader.

Childhood and adolescence is a time of social uncertainty. Children are unsure of what is right and wrong and many adolescents have rejected their parents' values, but are not yet certain of their own. It would appear highly likely that they would be disposed to follow the group leaders, the more respected or more popular students.

The imitation theory may explain the superficial situation but by itself is insufficient. This theory can be used to explain practically any type of group behavior. It does not consider the question of why certain students are rejected in the first place and why certain students display more hostility toward rejected students than others. Other models should be considered.

II. Developmental Factors

The preceding model considers social rejection in school as an example of the universal act of imitation. It is possible, however, to think of peer rejection as solely a childhood and adolescent phenomenon which is the unfortunate manifestation of certain developmental stages but passes with the maturity of the students.

Conformity is extremely important to young children. This is reflected in their games where imitation, following the rules, selecting the "it", ostracism, and inflicting pain are

salient features.

Conformity becomes even more important in early adolescence. Newman and Newman (1976) suggest that perhaps a stage should be added to Erickson's eight stages in between Industry v. Inferiority and Individual Identity v. Role Diffusion, a stage for early adolescence called Group Identity v. Alienation. In this stage the developmental conflict is resolved either by identifying with the peer group or remaining isolated from one's peers. Identification with and dependence on the peer group is a necessary step between dependence on one's family and independence. The peer group allows one to compare his own opinions and behavior against a standard besides one's parents. In addition, young teens turn to the group to help bolster self esteem.

The Group Identity v. Alienation stage actually begins at about nine. It is during this time that cohesive cliques develop and "best friends" become important. Children of this age begin to resent their parents' authority. The cliques of young adolescence are just a continuation from the "gang age" of older childhood.

Sex role and appearance are two of the areas that are of the most concern to the student at this stage of development. They are developing rapidly physically and have some difficulty adjusting to puberty. It is in the area of sex role for boys and appearance for girls that the 9-15 year old tries to conform the mostly closely with his/her peers.

The non-conformist in appearance or behavior threatens students in this developmental stage's shakey image of their own appearance or sex role. The boy who is uninterested in "masculine" things may threaten other boys' sense of masculinity. Thus the term "nurd" or "fag" become common put downs and the rejected student may be harassed in sexual ways, such as pulling down his pants, planting "love notes" in his desk, etc.

Even the fact that frequently the rejected student is a loner, although it is not by choice, makes him a suspect. By being a loner he deviates from the extremely important norms of belonging to a group.

Starting at about the age of sixteen, young people become less interested in conformity and more interested in developing a sense of individual identity. (Newman and Newman, 1976; Hurlock, 1964). Instead of being one of the crowd they want to be recognized as an individual who is respected among his peers. Hostility towards the rejected student seems to change from harassment aimed at someone who does not conform to ostracism where students are no longer disliked simply because they deviate from the group but because they have characteristics which are considered to be low status. The attitude changes from "I must punish him because he's weird" to "I don't want to associate with him because he's low status."

III The Authoritarian Personality

Many psychologists and sociologists believe that people with certain personality characteristics are disposed to be

more prejudiced. The authoritarian personality is one that is: (Allport, 1954)

1. Ambivalent toward parents
2. Moralistic
3. Dichotomized
4. Needs definiteness
5. Externalizes conflict

The authoritarian personality generally has been raised in a strict and disciplined environment where he was taught to repress his emotions and desires. His moral code is rigid. He dichotomizes abstract ideas into good and bad. He represses any negative feelings he has toward his strict parents and feels guilty about his impulses, especially sexual impulses. He projects his guilt onto the scapegoat whom he then can censure for the characteristics he refuses to recognize in himself.

It is possible that those who are hostile toward the rejected student have highly authoritarian personality structures. The uncertainty of adolescents and older children makes them uncomfortable and thus they adhere very rigidly to certain values and norms their peers hold. At the same time they may feel guilty about rebelling against their parents and their norms.

In addition, since boys are uncertain as to what the masculine role should be, they frequently confuse aggression with masculinity (Allport, 1954). By being aggressive against the person who appears to be a sex role deviant, they are projecting

fears of homosexuality onto someone else as well as reinforcing their masculinity. Girls, on the other hand, are taught that they must repress their sexual desires and so may project their own desires onto the girl who may appear more sociable and less inhibited than the other, the "tramp." Nevertheless, although sex role norms are not as rigid for girls and it is more acceptable for a girl to act masculinely than a boy to act femininely, they may fear homosexuality as boys do and project their fears onto someone else. This person becomes the "lesie."

Prejudicial attitudes are greater where "cognitive sophistication" is lacking. (Glock, 1968) Authoritarian personalities cannot see all sides of the issue, i.e. they lack cognitive sohpistication. Older children and young adolescents who adhere to peer norms closely become rigid in their moral and social code. Everything becomes categorized into "pro norm" and "anti norm." The boy with the glasses who reads and is uninterested in sports does not conform to their norm of masculinity. He must be a "fag."

The authoritarian personality is supposed to be the result of an oppressed and frustrated childhood. Older children and young adolescents are very often frustrated. They are restricted on all sides. They are too old to talk to themselves, rock on their beds and daydream, hit or throw a temper tantrum when frustrated or cry when they are upset. Any physical activity they engage in is in the form of a game, with rigid rules,

since they are too old for spontaneous play. Yet they are too young to make their own decisions, argue with their parents, go where they like or enjoy sex. At no age is external and internal repression stronger than at the nine to fifteen age in American culture.

Because of this repression children at this stage internalize a rigid code of behavior. They feel guilty for rebelling against this code and for the anger they feel at their parents and other authority figures who are oppressing them. They displace this anger and guilt onto the vulnerable target or easy mark, and then rationalize their behavior by stereotyping the rejected student.

Thus, in conclusion, it may be possible for a person to have a more authoritarian personality at certain developmental stages than at others and behave accordingly as a result of the repressive and frustrating environment he is in at that time. Personality even in a mature adult changes. It is highly possible that children and adolescents have personalities which are more authoritarian than their adult personalities.

IV. Group Solidarity

Up to this point the "why" of rejection has been discussed focusing on the individual rejector. Rejection, however, may serve a function for the group as a whole.

The older child's and young adolescent's reference group in school, his "clique" becomes the main force in his life. He

subsumes his individuality to conform closely to group norms. It has mechanical solidarity, since "ideas which are in common to all members of the society are greater in number and intensity than those which pertain personally to each member. This solidarity can grow only in inverse ratio to personality." (Coser, 1977). A class of students which is together all day, a grade or even a very small school with a relatively stable or homogenous student body can display mechanical solidarity. In a group where there is mechanical solidarity "every strongly offended sentiment...evokes a passionate reaction." (Durkheim, 1953). In mechanical solidarity there can be no room for dissent; the deviant cannot be tolerated.

The rejected student either voluntarily or involuntarily violates group norms. He becomes, in a certain sense, a criminal, and as a criminal he must be punished. If there are no negative sanctions against the deviance then this deviance must be permissible in the school society. By punishing, i.e. ostracizing, ridiculing and harassing the rejected peer, students reinforce group norms. Punishment of the deviant helps define the norms of the group and serves as an example to the others not to "get out of line." Sometimes every student in a school society which has mechanical solidarity must take part in the abuse or punishment of the deviant or they will also be suspect of not holding group values. According to this theory, rejection will be the most intense and extensive when the school society is the most mechanical, in an elementary

school or in a junior high school where a group travels from class to class together.

In a large junior high school or senior high school the mechanical solidarity of the class or school breaks down as a result of the increase in the size of the school, and the influx of students from many different areas and changing classes individually, among other things. The school becomes a pluralistic society. Group norms are no longer held in the same degree by all students. Since "deviance is sanctioned according to the degree of the relative consensus and the intensity of the prevailing values held"(Garfinkel, 1973), the rejected student is tolerated to a much greater extent; it is highly probable that he will lose his rejected status.

In addition, the deviant is no longer a threat to the mechanical solidarity of the group as that solidarity has broken down. In the organic society of the high school, where different students and cliques are allowed, in fact, required to play different roles, the deviant may find his niche.

Thus, not only developmental factors but also the structure of the school society may affect the intensity and extent of rejection.

V. Intergroup Conflict

Although the intensity and extent of rejection may diminish or change its form among older (16-18 years) students who are in a pluralistic high school, quite a bit of abuse sometimes still

occurs. In such schools different cliques may compete to fulfill the same roles and the same status positions within the school. The group that appears to hold the most power or has the highest status in the school may be resented by the others (Hollingshead, 1945; Glock, 1968; Poveda, 1975). When one of the groups in school is small or clearly on the bottom of the status structure for some reason the members of this group can be considered rejected. By ostracizing others who are not part of the group, a person defines who is in the group. By degrading others whom they feel are beneath them in status the group maintains its place on the school social hierarchy. In the case where the higher group may exploit the lower group they may justify the exploitation by saying that the lower group is inferior to them in some way.

In conclusion, developmental factors, (i.e. the saliency of personal and group status become more important than conformity to group norms) and structural factors, (i.e. the pluralism of the large school) change the nature of rejection among older students. It now becomes what in the vernacular is called "pure snobbishness."

This is not to say, however, that pure snobbishness does not exist at lower grades. An influx of "new kids" may not only be thought of as deviant because they are "new kids," i.e. alien, but because they pose a threat to the status of the existing group. Conversely, deviance may be an important reason for social rejection in upper grades. The boy who is poor in sports

may not only be ostracized because those competent in sports have higher status but because he deviates from the norm. In addition, some students may remain more authoritarian than others in older adolescence and will continue to be hostile toward deviants. As those who conform to group norms generally have higher status, even when these norms are not as strong, and those who deviate from the norm generally have lower status, the distinction between punishment and snobbishness is not always clear in practice.

The above models are by no means mutually exclusive. Nevertheless different models will be better able to explain rejection in different schools depending on the factors in operation in the school social structure. Not all models will be in operation in every case.

These models cannot be individually "proved" to be more or less the "right" explanations for rejection any more than any theory for any social phenomenon can be definitively demonstrated. However, each model points to different types of data. To test the imitation model it must be determined if "leaders" in rejecting and abusing the rejected students exist. Testing the developmental model would require observation of whether students who are relatively insecure abuse the rejected students more, if the intensity of rejection is greatest in the nine to fifteen age bracket, if the majority of rejected students in these age brackets deviate in sex role characteristics or appearance. Study of the authoritarian personality model would involve determining the degree of authoritarianism in the school and

perhaps the home environment, and the degree of authoritarianism in the personality structures of those who abuse the rejected students the most. Research on the group solidarity model implies determining if there is more rejection in elementary school than in high school and whether the abuse of rejected students is greater among "tight" cliques and in smaller and more homogenous school populations. Determining the validity of the intergroup conflict model involves determining the degree of a social stutus hierarchy among students and the degree of hostility between different groups on the hierarchy. Empirical research will be complex and difficult but attempting to overcome the many methodological and perhaps ethical problems involved is requiredif educators andresearchers are to acquire a clearer understanding of the process of rejection.

Determining why rejection occurs however, is just an intellectual exercise unless it leads to action-- to attempt to eliminate rejection. Most approaches have focused on ways to modify the deviant rejected child. Those approaches which have attempted to change the social environment have simply focused on helping students develop more accepting attitudes towards the rejected student. They include praising the student in front of the group (Retish, 1973), play therapy in elementary school (Lund, 1964), giving low status students materials the rest of the group needs to further group goals (McGonagle, 1976), working together on projects in a democratic atmosphere (Spector, 1953), programs or units on how to get along with others (Cunningham, 1951); Spector, 1963), and

comprehensive approaches which involve changing the student's seat, praising the contribution he makes to the group and putting him to work on tasks with the more popular children (Amidon, 1961; Bonney, 1971).

In reviewing the literature on these programs, (Bonney, 1971) points out that all of them are ineffective. Whenever they appear to be successful it appears that the second sociometric test was given directly after intervention. If a third sociometric test is given several weeks after the intervention, whatever gains there were (and they were usually not great) wash out (Till, 1971; Davis, 1948) and the rejected or isolated child returns back to his old status.

The rejection of peers appears to be an inherent part of social development and the structure of the school social environment. The preceding models imply that the only effective way to eliminate rejection would be to radically restructure the school environment to prevent the formation of social groups among children. Even if this were possible it would be undesirable as it would interfere with the social development of students.

Although it is difficult to completely change students' attitudes towards the peers they reject, it may be possible to mitigate some of the overt physical and verbal abuse the rejected student faces. Much abuse can be stopped if students are helped to see that although they may not like the peers they reject, they are not objects or symbols of badness but people with feelings like themselves. The efforts of teachers

and child treatment professionals should be directed toward developing programs which reach this objective. By setting realistic goals and developing solutions which focus on the process of rejection instead of its object we will help not only the rejected student but everyone.

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